

Specific Research

Choose Your Branch

When you climb a tree, you eventually have to make a choice about which direction to go. Several branches may be strong enough to hold you, but you can only sit on one of them at a time. It's the same with your family tree.

Let's say you find out that your great-great-great grandfather, Jack, fought in France during World War One. You also find out that a distant ancestor, whose name you aren't sure of, was born into the Lakota Sioux tribe AND that Mollie, another distant ancestor, traveled the Oregon Trail back in 1849. All three would make an exciting story...but you need to decide between them. You can only write one story at a time. Which one of the three will you base this assignment on?

The best way to make the decision is to ask yourself: whose life is most interesting to me, the author? If you're more interested in Native American history than the Oregon Trail or World War One, then by all means, write about your Native American ancestor. If you happen to find Mollie's life on the Oregon Trail fascinating, then base your story on her experiences. If the Great War intrigues you, then it makes sense to base your story on Great-Great Grandpa Jack.

If you have a personal interest in a subject, you're going to enjoy writing about it. If an author enjoys writing a story, his reader will catch his enthusiasm and have a great time reading it.

YOUR TURN

Write down the name of the ancestor you've decided to base your story on. Beneath his or her name, list the reasons you chose this particular person.

*“Whose life
is most interesting
to me?”*

What Does It Mean To “Base A Story” On Someone?

A base is a foundation. If a story is based on a real person, that person’s life is the foundation of the story. You start with the basic facts about that person, and build upward, adding layers of fiction.

Your story can be **closely** or **loosely** based on an ancestor.

If you know a great amount of detail about your chosen ancestor, then your story will be closely based on his life. Maybe you know exactly where he lived, what he did for a living, and perhaps even things he said or thought are recorded in a diary your family owns.

If you know only a few facts about your chosen ancestor, your story will be loosely based on her life. You will have to use your imagination to fill in the gaps.

Whether your story is closely or loosely based on an ancestor, you will need to build upward on the foundation of his or her life.

How is it done? . . . by . . .

Blending Fact And Fiction

Remember:

fiction is:

- a) something invented by the imagination
- b) an invented story

fact is:

- a) a thing done
- b) the quality of being real, or true



FLO-151, Confederate Soldiers, ca. 1863 VGC

Anachronism

Using a dictionary, define:

anachronism:

chronology:

IMAGINE...settling down to read an adventure novel about a slave girl in 1858 who escapes from her master and makes her way north to freedom. Your heart beats faster as you read; you feel like you're right there with her as she rumbles, concealed beneath a pile of straw in a farm wagon, toward a "safe house." A woman hurries out to greet the wagon and usher the girl inside where she will prepare her a...frozen microwave dinner? Later, the girl will hide in the woman's attic, watching...television?

Suddenly the mood is broken – you aren't in the slave girl's world anymore, and you can't trust the author of that book to lead you into a historical time period.

Frozen dinners, microwaves and television don't belong in the year 1858.

Anachronism, then, is a failure to place a person, event, object, or custom in its proper time period.

YOUR TURN

List five examples of anachronism. (such as: a knight in armor driving a truck on the freeway)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

NOTE: Speech can be anachronistic. Two hundred and fifty years ago, people didn't say, "That's cool!" or "Let's hang out together after school."

When you've chosen your story's time period, see if you can find some common expressions from that era by reading books or websites about daily life during that time period. Use a few of them in your story to make it more authentic.



*How do you come
up with a plot?
By weaving
together fact and
fiction.*

Fact or Fiction?

Can some parts of the story be both fact AND fiction? The following list will give you a guideline to follow. Think of these eleven story elements as “threads” in your tapestry.

Larger Place Names must be FACT.

If your novel takes place in New England, you will need to use the name of an actual state and/or town.

Smaller Place Names can be FACT or FICTION.

It is okay to create a fictional place name for a smaller location, such as a village or farm.

Characters’ Names can be FACT or FICTION.

You could use your ancestors’ real names, or you might choose to change their names slightly. For example, in *The Bushwhacker*, I changed my ancestors’ last name from Canada to Canaday because I thought readers might be distracted by a last name that was the same as a country. Since the country Canada had nothing to do with my story, I added the “y” in order to keep the name as close as possible to the real thing, yet change it enough to correct the problem. The story can still be based on your ancestors, whether or not you choose to use their exact names.

Characters’ Appearance can be FACT or FICTION.

If you know your great-great grandmother had red hair and freckles, then go ahead and describe her that way in your story. But if all you have is an old black and white or sepia photograph, or no photograph at all, then give her the hair color and appearance of your choice. Or use what features you can see in a photograph, and make up the rest. Another option is to take a good look at yourself and other family members who are directly descended from the ancestor you have chosen to write about. If none of you have brown eyes, then chances are good your ancestor didn’t either. You may even want to choose a living relative and base your physical description of the ancestor in your story on that person’s own features and coloring.

Famous Events Such as Wars, Battles, Political Elections, and Natural Disasters must be FACT.

Not only does a reader want to be entertained by historical fiction, he wants to learn something about that time period, too. The historical events that surround your characters must be accurate.

Dates and Times of Famous Events (Such as Above) must be FACT.

If the great San Francisco earthquake of 1906 took place in April in the early morning hours, then you don’t want to say it happened on an October evening. Take time to research the exact times and seasons of any famous events you include in your story. Accuracy in this area will help your reader feel like she is really experiencing an event the way it happened.

Student Checklist

Preparation:

- Family Tree chart filled out
- Specific interview questions written
- Interviews completed
- Specific ancestor and story setting chosen
- Family photographs, general historical photographs and/or paintings studied
- Historical Research notes completed
- Roadmap written
- Type of story beginning chosen

Writing:

- Rough draft hand-written
- Rough draft checked for **content**:
 - story reads as fiction and not as a “report”
 - plot makes sense and flows well
 - story weaves together fact and fiction (is believable and interesting)
 - story contains enough historical facts to make the reader feel like he or she is “in” the time period and setting (for example: descriptions of clothing, food, travel, tools, chores, houses, etc.)
- story is historically accurate
- story contains no anachronisms
- (short) story doesn’t have too many characters
- historical facts are “sprinkled throughout the story and not “dumped”
- story’s setting is clearly described (place names, landscape, climate, true historical events)
- story includes dialogue
- dialogue is appropriate to the story’s time period and setting
- Rough draft transferred to computer (double spaced) and printed out

Editing:

- First computer draft checked for **style**:
 - story has a strong title that creates interest
 - story has a strong beginning that draws the reader in